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Mexican Party Losing Its Grip, CIA Concludes

In a top-secret report, the CIA has concluded that the near-monopoly party that has dominated Mexico for more than half a century, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), is running scared. The Central Intelligence Agency is concerned that the situation could lead to revolution from the right or left.

The report, entitled "Prospects for Instability in Mexico," was prepared for President Reagan before he met with Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid in May. My associate Dale Van Atta has reviewed the report's self-described "key judgments."

The CIA dealt at length with the municipal elections of July 1983. The ruling party was jolted by the astonishing success of the opposition National Action Party (PAN).

Though PAN won only five of 61 contested legislative seats and nine of 105 municipal posts in five Mexican states, it was PRI's worst showing in its 54-year history. PAN candidates were elected mayors of two state capitals, Chihuahua and Durango, and of Ciudad Juarez, the border town across from El Paso, Tex.

In the two northern states,

where PAN is strongest, it was able to force relatively clean elections by monitoring every polling place. Whenever obvious manipulation was spotted, PAN's poll watchers used citizens-band radios to call in demonstrators with bullhorns and lawyers well versed in electoral procedures. Under these circumstances, as one Mexican columnist observed, "it was not practical for any PRI representative to try the decrepit set of tricks of the party's Golden Age."

This may also explain why PRI at first let the election results stand, something it had never done after losing. Traditionally, opposition victories at the polls were lost later in the government-run vote-counting rooms.

But the CIA noted that it didn't take long for PRI to reverse its little experiment in democracy. At least two of the elections were declared void, and PRI engaged in a new round of vote-rigging. PRI didn't lose any major contests after that, the CIA reported, because it used "massive ballot stuffing."

Some of the most flagrant excesses occurred in PRI's efforts to prevent opposition victories in Acapulco and the states of Sinaloa and Puebla. According to Mexican sources, teachers at government-run schools in Sinaloa were observed filling out hundreds of ballots the day before election.

Voters who were first in line the next day found the ballot boxes so

full they couldn't cram in ballots. At several polling places, angry voters broke open the ballot boxes and hundreds of PRI votes tumbled out.

In one contest PRI thought it might lose, party bully boys arrested the opposition candidate, the popular PAN mayor of Ciudad Obregon, and brought trumped-up charges, such as "non-fulfillment of official duties." He was brought to trial and convicted within a month. Public outcry was so great that the mayor has not had to start serving his three-year sentence.

Violence is not unknown in response to PRI election-rigging. Last October, when PRI stole an election from the Socialist Workers Party in Namiquipa, Chihuahua, some 2,000 citizens stormed the mayor's office. One protester was killed, a woman had her arm torn off by an explosive bullet and at least 150 demonstrators were beaten by police.

In the July 1983 elections, PRI leaders charged that PAN candidates had been elected through fraud, then complained that they shouldn't be allowed to hold office because they lacked experience. PRI also charged that PAN had won because of financial support from the U.S. Democratic National Committee and the FBI.

Finally, PRI declared several of the elections void, rescheduled them for last April 1 and won through its traditional chicanery.

Popular outrage led to a riot May 2 in Chihuahua city.